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## Writing Sample

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Poems translated from the Rinconada, Bikol and Filipino

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## Kristian Sendon CORDERO

**Poems** translated from the Rinconada, Bikol and Filipino

**About Rinconada, Bikol, and Filipino:** The Bikol languages are a group of Central Philippine languages spoken mostly on the Bicol Peninsula in the island of Luzon, the neighbouring island province of Catanduanes and the island of Burias of Masbate. There is a dialect continuum between the Visayan languages and the Bikol languages; the two together are called the Bisakol languages. The Rinconada language is spoken in the 5<sup>th</sup> political district of Camarines Sur. The Filipino/Tagalog is considered as the national language of the Philippines.

### Old Buddha Sitting on Nagã

DON'T mistake it for a piece of rock  
Cast on the wayside, and found.  
Mark the seven serpent heads, symbols  
Of wisdom rising from the ground.  
Feel its stare, the eyes are sometimes  
Shut, absolutely without pride:  
Never atone for your sins—this he has long  
known and will not abide—  
And you will be born again human.  
The known thief becomes a grasshopper;  
Drowned in the well the unrepentant adulterer.  
If you fear waking up a locust, you might yet  
Start now and try learning to be a poet.

\*

### Towards St. Elmo's Isle

IN and out, coming and going,  
the stevedores were bustling at the pier.  
Feet were racing each other unloading  
things needed for the fiesta.  
The boat had to leave  
before eight or it would be grounded  
by the receding tide.

For every minute of delay  
the Enchanted Rock rose out of the water—  
the magnetic islet that even  
the most skilled pilots feared.

Grains of sand blew in the wind  
and stuck to hair.  
The spray caught in the skin

of passengers  
and hardened into salt.

So they chased time.  
So time chased *them*.

\*

### **The Universe According to the Earth**

RECURRENCE does not repeat itself.

Even the same names of the dead  
intoned in masses intended to redeem  
and silence them—

The souls the old bell called in  
when the wind, fire, and water were one  
inside a volcano's bowels.

It cannot be repeated. This was how they blamed  
heaven that now stood accused. They wrapped their rage  
and raging raised again the towers and edifices  
with the black stones that were proof of the last ruinous tempest

.  
They carved the scenes in memory:  
how everything is repeatedly buried, obliterated.  
The wound festers  
and the rot eats the rest of the skin.

To calm human fear and fury  
he returned to religion that became the new science:  
Only belief in the soul shall save the body.  
Everything returns to earth.

Nothing will be left of what's left.  
Everything will recur but nothing will be repeated  
not even prayers, not love.

This is how memory is honed, exercised. This is how  
the universe of man expands,  
the man who would now be looking up a volcano,  
questioning the season of leaves folding.

Man now knows that knowing time is just the same  
as scooping up the sand that covers his land.

He crushes it in his hand. Watch.  
Recurrence does not repeat itself.

\*

### The Melancholy of the Ancient Fire

I.

It was the ancient love for fire seared the hearts of the first humans—  
In the middle of kindling they found each other. Inside a cave was born  
all sense of belonging. Outside, tiger and bull gave chase, a python snapped up  
a mouse and butterflies were starting to open their wings like flowers:  
yellow, white, glistening black, beneath the graying sky.

II.

The ancient love for fire was not a new religion brought to us  
by muscular foreigners. The sun has long been worshipped in the old realm—  
its heat suffused the breast: and the heart ripened.  
The seed in the seedling was buried to slumber under the fragrant earth,  
filling the world with the seven colors of the rainbow; words were silent  
cries, understood like water slaking a dry throat.

III.

The ancient love for fire enters the consciousness, flesh to flesh, blood to blood.  
If all the light of the ancient fire fades and we are devoured by the harshest worries—  
Hush, for in the middle of the whole wide world someone will light a cigar  
and console himself, collecting all the memories, putting down the saddest lyrics  
of the people before the volcano exuding slow deliquescent fire from its full erect peak.

\*

### The Day a Storm with my Mother's Name Came

*LUCIA*, was what Father uttered at once  
the moment he heard news of a coming storm—  
a name he looked at and looked over for all time,  
as he straddled what could be sea or soil on fire\*.

The wind had begun to whistle so we fixed  
the wall and roof together with my younger brother.  
We roped the windows tight and stowed the rice  
up where they wouldn't get wet in a flood.

At the other house, we could hear the static  
on the failing radio, the dogs were barking  
and the banana plants were starting to rattle like teeth,  
the kapok pods were falling on the overgrown yard.

Black ants lined up in procession towards the jar  
that we used to store chunks of molasses and sugared  
coconut flesh: Sweetness, it seemed was not taste  
alone, but part of scent and memory.

At the chair sat my unspeaking father,  
 he'd been there long waiting for the spray of rain  
 coming in, sunlight, song, fever, chest pain, medicine,  
 and life pouring its last drops

While he looked over and uttered each of the letters  
 in Mother's name, who was coming as a storm,  
 a name looked at and looked over for all time  
 as he straddled what could be sea or soil on fire.

\*Idiom in the original which means *severe suffering*

\*

### **Melancholy**

YOU can't fly it in the wind,  
 or it becomes a whirlwind.

You can't plant it in the earth,  
 or the earth will tremble.

You can't cast it to the waves,  
 or the sea will be feverish.

But you can only warm it  
 Around the fire in the company  
 of strangers while rubbing your palms  
 together and bringing them to your face,  
 neck, chest, forehead.

Outside dreams freeze  
 and the smell of burning hair spreads.

\*

### **Stigmata on the Tongue**

THEY imprisoned the poet in the fort of female saints and there taught him prayer-poems. His first attempts produced foul utterances, words that were like stigmata on the tongue. Until they gave him the Word's flesh, Its taste could only reach the tip of his tongue. He had since discovered other words: First, that *oath* or *promise* never meant anything, *courage* hemorrhaged while each letter of *principle*, *truth*, or *life*, rotted.

*Passion* itself was ablaze, a ball of fire searing the linings of his throat.  
 What he couldn't write was—*love*, it was much too cold, like long dead bread.

*Translated from the Bikol and the Filipino by Marne Kilates*

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**Ode to Nothingness by Way of Some Things***Tangerine*

OUTSIDE the window  
a farmer teases the lightning  
that become like fingers

pointing, scaring  
the carabao.

While I eat,  
my tongue feels the seeds  
of this tart tangerine

which I throw to the ground  
without any hope  
for an afterlife.

*Shells*

By the doorway  
the shells  
hang.

When they touch each other  
because of the wind,

he longs  
for the old occupants  
of the house.

*Glass Jars*

The empty glass jars  
are saved,  
and cleaned

until the brittle things  
end crystalline.  
They are dried under the sun,

and wiped by the wind.  
Then they will be placed  
on a tabletop.

You wonder where  
the force that will break them  
will come from.

They stand there silent,  
the finger prints  
of those who cleaned them  
still visible.

\*

### **The First Burial**

THE couple finally found  
the dead body of their son.  
He is sprawled on the farm  
of his elder brother.

The father examined if there  
was a trace of snake bites  
or he was holding the fruit  
of the tree forbidden them.

The corpse already stinks  
so the pair dug deep to return  
to dust what came from dust.

That night, they began to sleep  
beside each other for seven days,  
with the siblings. They have to multiply.

\*

### **Prayer**

*I circle around God, around the primordial tower  
I've been circling for thousand of years  
And I still don't know: am I a falcon  
A storm or a great song?*

- Rainier Maria Rilke

When I pray  
I become like a votive candle  
being lit and planted on a slate.

I must admit I sense a whiff  
of pride when I feel

I talk to God and He to me,  
in a different way.

I also feel happy  
with the marriage of faith  
and doubt in me.

Sometimes, I pray as if  
I am only talking to myself,

like a solitary candle straining to stay burning  
steadily in meditation before the Almighty

Until the slate, the wick, the flame,  
the wind, and god all merged in me

and leave me uncertain of who I am

whether I am a fool, a seared bud, a dove,  
or an unfinished poem.

*Translated from the Rinconada, the Filipino and the Bikol by Frank Penoñes Jr.*

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#### About the Translators:

**Frank Peñones Jr.** is one of Bikol's respected literary icons. He has received writing and study grants from the University of the Philippines, Cultural Center of the Philippines and the Ford International. Author of *Ragang Rinara: Rawitdawit/Poems (2005)* published by Agnus Press in Naga City, he has won several times in the Saint Peter Baptist Catholic Mass Media Awards, 2005 Premio Tomas Arejola Para Sa Literaturang Bikol, the Palanca, the Sumagang Awards For Literature and Journalism and is one of the recipients of Outstanding Bikolano Artists Awards for 2009. He recently finished his MFA at San Jose State University in California.

**Marne Kilates** is an award-winning poet, translator, communications consultant, and former advertising copywriter and creative director. He has published six books of poetry, the latest of which are *Lyrical Objects* (UST Publishing House, 2016), and *Time's Enchantment & Other Reflections* (Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2015). He has won the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards, National Book Awards, and the Southeast Asia (S.E.A. Write) Award given by the King of Thailand. He has translated into English numerous books by leading poets writing in the national language, including National Artists for Literature Virgilio S. Almario (Rio Alma) and Bienvenido Lumbera. Kilates was the holder of the Henry Lee Irwin Professorial Chair for Creative Writing (Poetry) at the Ateneo de Manila University for academic year 2011-2012. He was named Poet of the Year in the *Philippines Graphic* Nick Joaquin Literary Awards in 2013. In 2014, he was honored as an Outstanding Citizen for the Literary Arts in his home province of Albay.

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